

THE COMRADES

ARI SITAS, Professor of Sociology, based his findings on research conducted through the Youth and Unemployment Project of Natal University's Centre for Industrial and Labour Studies of comrades in Natal and KwaZulu.

THE TYRE, the petrol-bomb, the knife, the stone, the hacking: death. The words "comrade" and "amaqabane" conjure them up. The television screen, the newspapers and indeed many black youth initiatives all over South Africa have contributed to the conjuring act.

There is a "comrade-type reflex" with the mention of "comrade." The hint of a communist fraternity in the word is partly the reason, but, the word also frames images of unemployed black youth with no future, no home, busy destroying everything in their way: homes, shops, schools, infrastructures and traditions — hardly expropriating the "expropriators" (some have argued). They rather have been expropriating the "vulnerable", perpetuating lawlessness.

The media picture is of young men, hungry men, with hardened features and red eyes: the myth of a primal Africa when patriarchy collapses and the age-sets run loose: a new version of barbarism. The "older" version, Inkatha, strikes back.

As thinking creatures we surely need to expect more than that?

Sociologists have identified comrades with two broad social indicators: black youth unemployment and "anomic" behaviour.

I would like to argue against both indicators. It is not helpful crudely to identify or equate "comrades" with black youth unemployment.

Yes, most comrades are young (below 35); yes, most comrades come from embattled working class homesteads and households; yes, most of their cultural codes emerge outside households and kinship relations; yes, many are unemployed. But among the phenomenon called comrades we will find full wage-earners, informal sector vendors, university graduates, political activists, schoolchildren, shopstewards, petty-criminals and lumpenproletarians.

The question is, what binds them together? "Anomic" is not the correct concept to capture the process of mobilisation. Rather, what Mark Orkin called "contranomia" its direct opposite, is more apt: an attempt, desperate at times, to control and defend their areas after the collective efforts of protest action against the "system" were attacked, fought against and almost destroyed.

We are dealing then with a social movement, with its peculiar Natal overtones.

In 1983 the UDF launched its campaign in a new era of mass mobilisation against apartheid. Although many felt that a disciplined mobilisation would forestall Government's attempts to reform and to change the currents of its Rubicon, by 1984, after the police shot at the Langa demonstrators, protests turned to insurrection. By 1985,

South Africa was engulfed in a black youth uprising.

Natal had its own dynamics. By 1985 the emerging congress movement and its militant youth was pitted against Chief Buthelezi's Inkatha, the Kwazulu homeland structure and the central state. The Durban explosion around August that year brought together Inkatha's urban power blocs, the Kwazulu administration and the apartheid state in an effort to "normalise" the townships and to roll back the UDF's street mobilisation. By 1987, the war in Natal was officially spoken of between supporters of the MDM, Inkatha and the state, or — as it was spoken of by congress youth — between the "comrades" on the one hand, and (whom they termed, with derogatory vigour) "theleweni" on the other.

The political moments of struggle, 1985-8 are central to our understanding of the comrades as a social movement. Added to the socio-economic conditions of urban poverty that put severe pressure on ordinary black people's lives, there emerged an explosive political process of challenge, protest and change.

It is difficult to find the precise language or, rather, imagery to describe the congress movement's mobilisation over national and sometimes regional issues. Perhaps the best image is one of an unusual octopus with a head and tentacles growing out and outwards; as the tentacles grow too long, a new head grows on them and it, in turn, grows new tentacles. It is a process of growth with core-groups of activists in the townships spreading from area to area and in that spread, new nuclei grow on and on. Calls from the "head" over campaigns and issues are responded to. But within each "tentacle", unique conditions arising from local socio-economic conditions *shape* growth and the way this "octopus" grips onto its environment.

Add to this image another ingredient: the state's repressive arm and, with varying degrees of efficacy, Kwazulu authorities, councillors, vigilantes, and Inkatha-led networks, remove the heads or slash through the tentacles.

With this the growth of the movement can be visualised as a process that constantly coheres and fragments. As leading core-activists get removed, detained, killed, "headless" tentacles grow independently of one another.

Still, since 1985, when the conflict started, congress was small in numbers and vulnerable. By 1991 the comrades were everywhere from Port Shepstone to Paulpietersburg; to Newcastle and Richards Bay.

Growth happened though through *real* township spaces — the streets, the schools, the shebeens, the backyards, the open soccer

spaces, in an oral continuum of communication despite the state of emergency, violence and Caspir patrols.

Such growth was helped by the large numbers of black youth in the streets whether unemployed or at school. But since 1986, Cosatu shop stewards and younger workers started throwing their lot into the fray and, depending on the locality, the self-employed, the graduate, the student and the lumpenproletarian. Since then the ferocity of the movement's repression sprang defence committees at street and area levels.

Comrades then, are not strictly speaking the correlate of an objective structure (eg. unemployment) or a structure's simple 'manifestation', they are a movement involving voluntary (and sometimes coerced) participation, cultural dynamics and a new volatile social identity shaped through mobilisation and conflict.

Comrades are somehow those who cannot escape their social geography, the streets of their township. They distinguish themselves from those, for example, with cars or money who are able to flee their locality.

Initially, the comrades aggressively defined themselves against those with middle-class aspirations — the people with "perms" and with "funky" clothes — but as the conflict engulfed everybody other criteria were developed. They see themselves as the children of the poor and the oppressed.

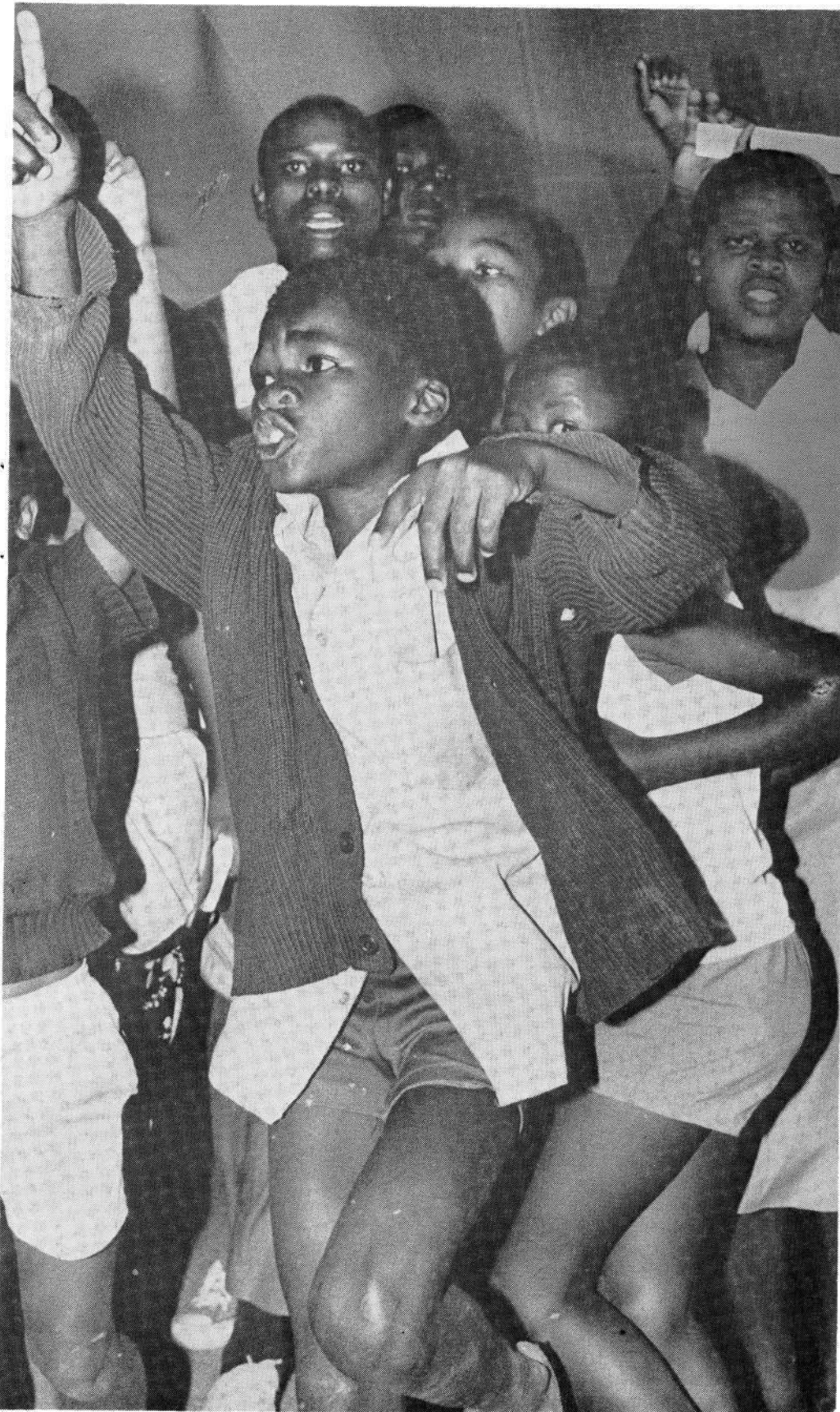
Secondly, they are the soldiers of the liberation movement. A militarisation of their subculture is endemic to any of their gatherings. They are the movement's combatants unto death.

Thirdly, between the levelling idea of belonging to the "have-nots" and the militarised culture of resistance, there is a cultural formation that is about "style" in everyday common behaviour. You belong because of the way you sing, the slogans you know, the lineages you have learnt, the way you speak to each other. With such styles there is innovation and imitation as mannerisms and fashions spread very fast.

Fourthly, there is among comrades a new community of social solidarity and a new gender division. On the one hand, a new brotherhood of combatants have emerged with all the self-sacrifice for the group and for the community/struggle. There are real communities of care and sharing. There is also a new sisterhood — emancipated from the homestead it plays a new supportive role of caring, nursing, risking and feeling.

On this new edge romantic liaisons and social problems proliferate.

Fifthly, there is a fragile combination between two contradictory ideas. On the one level, comrades are fearless, they are the death-defiers. They stand against the



Comrades all: Young children, young men and women demonstrate on the streets in Pietermaritzburg. Clint Zsman took the photograph.

“system” and its “puppets” and “lackeys”. On the other hand this fearlessness needs treatment against fear. There is a proliferation of muti and war medicine in their daily lives and battles.

These pillars mark a boundary of feelings that define some of the comrades’ politico-cultural framework. Such feelings are embroiled in “violence” against the “system” — or better, as comrades see it a process of territorial “counter-violence”.

To understand though why “counter-violence”, we need to explore their legitimating ideas: what defines the core of their ideological positions.

Comrades see themselves as home-defenders. Their violence is seen by them as a counter-violence to the obvious violence of the ‘other’ — the ‘system’, ‘Inkatha’, etc. They react to the actual or even potential capacity for violence of the ‘other’ by acting or pro-acting.

The same, of course, can be said for Inkatha supporters, or ordinary policemen. They also see their violence as counter to others’ violent intentions or initiatives.

Furthermore, the “other” is not an abstraction. Every comrade can name the community person on the other side who either led or participated in an attack on their households or their friends. Unless it was a case of combis in the night shooting at them, or unmarked cars, or sudden night raids, they were fully conscious of the “warlords” who led the attacks, their leadership structures and their residences.

On both sides it is a war between “knowns” within familiar territories. But of note here is that to defend, comrades created the “other” as a surplus person to be physically routed: exactly in the same way as they are seen as such by the opposing side.

Secondly, in the case of community defence, *practise is primary*.

Even when in flight or retreat one’s behaviour continues to measure worth. On retreats, a romantic notion of being “hunted” takes over — you are being ‘hunted’ for a cause, for justice, for being a freedom fighter.

One’s behaviour in protecting and helping fellow comrades in flight is definitive of character.

Thirdly, existence as a comrade is also punctuated by poverty and a total lack of resources. Leading a warring life outside of homesteads demands new support structures but also a respect for common property. What is got is shared and distributed according to need.

Fourthly, there are not only the fighters, the lions — there are too, the thinkers and the resource people. Leadership demands a study in its own right — it has to do with martyrdom, experience, connections, popularity, charisma . . .

Central, too, are the varied “resource” people — those, that is, who help overcome the scarcity of resources and provide goods, weapons, fuel, muti, money, guns, cars, pamphlets, information.

Such resource people range from workers in anti-apartheid projects, workers in church and charity extension programmes, KwaZulu administration people, civil servants, criminals.

Fifthly, “struggle” is legitimated practically. Here two connections are central: the peers who crossed the borders to join MK to “fight for freedom”; those who have come back and died or who had been jailed and those who were detained, tortured, victimised, killed.

Sixthly, processes of conflict within existing institutions: at school, the struggles over democratic SRC’s, against Inkatha membership drives, against sexual abuse in schools, boycotts, stay-aways, strikes. They all spilled out into the streets to confirm the comrades resistance folklore. Conflicts at home between elders and youngsters, conflict over overcrowded home-spaces, flowed into the youth-bias of the movement. The parallel struggle of workers in the factories confirmed for all of them that this was a total struggle for “freedom”.

Finally, the idea of a general strike: *the* strike — that would mobilise *all* in a final action that would crumble the structure of

